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 R 180859Z DEC 85
 FM AMEMBASSY DAMASCUS
 TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC 3669
 INFO RUEHAS/AMEMBASSY ALGIERS 1754
 RUEHAM/AMEMBASSY AMMAN 4358
 RUEHAD/AMEMBASSY BAGHDAD 5515
 RUEHBL/AMEMBASSY BEIRUT 1368
 RUEHEG/AMEMBASSY CAIRO 1947
 RUEHJM/AMCONSUL JERUSALEM 8795
 RUEHKU/AMEMBASSY KUWAIT 4152
 RUEHLD/AMEMBASSY LONDON 4085
 RUEHMO/AMEMBASSY MOSCOW 2302
 RUFHFR/AMEMBASSY PARIS 3202
 RUEHRH/AMEMBASSY RIYADH 5216
 RUEHTV/AMEMBASSY TEL AVIV 2172
 RUEHTU/AMEMBASSY TUNIS 2102
 RUSNAAA/USEUCOM VAIHINGEN GE
 RUCJACC/USCENTCOM MACDILL AFB FL
 RUEKJCS/DIA WASHINGTON DC
 BT
 S E C R E T DAMASCUS 07870

LONDON FOR RAPHEL
 PARIS FOR WINN
 UNCINCENT FOR POLAD LOWRIE

E.O. 12356: DECL: OADR
 TAGS: MOPS, PTER, PINR, LE, IS, SY, UR
 SUBJECT: YEAR OF THE MARTYR

1. SECRET - ENTIRE TEXT.

2. SUMMARY: 1985 HAS BEEN THE YEAR OF THE SUICIDE BOMBER, OR "MARTYR." SYRIA'S HAND IN THE MARTYRDOM OPERATIONS IS SCARCELY CONCEALED, WITH HAFIZ AL-ASAD EXPLOITING EACH EVENT FOR MAXIMUM PROPAGANDA VALUE, INCLUDING TO STRENGTHEN HIS OWN PERSONALITY CULT. THE INDIVIDUALS INVOLVED IN THE OPERATIONS ARE DRIVEN BY A MIX OF COMPLEX MOTIVATIONS, INCLUDING ISLAMIC VALUES, A RIGHTEOUS CAUSE, AND PERSONAL GLORY AND GAIN. FOR SYRIA, THE MILITARY VALUE IS VIRTUALLY NIL, BUT POLITICALLY EACH SUICIDE OPERATION IS ENTHRALLING. FINALLY, THE PROGRAM OF SUICIDE BOMBINGS APPEARS TO ENJOY PRESIDENT ASAD'S PERSONAL COMMITMENT; INDEED, THE PRESIDENT HIMSELF HAS LONG

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BEEN FASCINATED WITH THE IDEA OF MARTYRDOM. END
SUMMARY.

A RECORD YEAR FOR MARTYRS

3. 1985 SHOULD GO DOWN IN THE RECORD BOOKS AS A BANNER YEAR FOR SUICIDE BOMBINGS, KNOWN HERE AS "MARTYRDOM OPERATIONS" (AMALYAT ISTISHADIYA). SINCE THE ISRAELI WITHDRAWAL FROM SOUTH LEBANON IN JUNE 1985, AT LEAST 14 YOUNG PEOPLE HAVE LAUNCHED THEMSELVES AGAINST THE REMAINING ISRAELI PRESENCE, AND, ESPECIALLY, THE ARMY OF SOUTH LEBANON. IN THE SIX MONTHS PRIOR TO THE ISRAELI WITHDRAWAL, THERE WAS A STRING OF MARTYRDOM OPERATIONS, SOME OF WHICH CAUSED SERIOUS CASUALTIES AMONG IDF SOLDIERS. AS THE YEAR HAS PROGRESSED, THE VISIBILITY AND PACE OF OPERATIONS HAS GROWN, WITH THE SYRIAN HAND SHOWING MORE AND MORE.

CHARACTERISTICS OF THE OPERATIONS

4. THE LATEST SUICIDE OPERATIONS DIFFER SIGNIFICANTLY FROM THE DEADLY BOMBINGS OF US FACILITIES IN LEBANON IN 1983 AND 1984. MOST IMPORTANTLY, THE PERPETRATORS IN EACH CASE ARE KNOWN, WITH SYRIAN TELEVISION REGULARLY SHOWING PRE-RECORDED VIDEO TAPES OF THE MARTYR, REplete WITH A PERSONAL BIOGRAPHY, A STATEMENT OF PARTY LOYALTIES, A PAEAN TO PRESIDENT ASAD, AND AN EXHORTATION TO JOIN THE ARAB STRUGGLE AGAINST THE ZIONIST ENEMY. SECOND, THERE APPEAR TO BE MANY MORE VOLUNTEERS FOR THE MARTYRDOM OPERATIONS. THIRD, FEW OF THE LATEST OPERATIONS HAVE YIELDED ANY SIGNIFICANT MILITARY SUCCESS.

SYRIA'S HAND NOT SO HIDDEN

5. BUT PERHAPS THE MOST IMPORTANT DIFFERENCE IS THAT SYRIA IS DOING LITTLE TO SHADOW OR TO MASK ITS INSTIGATION. FOR EXAMPLE, THE LATEST MARTYR, A YOUNG WOMAN FROM NORTHERN SYRIA, OPENLY DECLARED HER ASSOCIATION WITH THE SYRIAN BA'TH PARTY IN HER PRE-RECORDED VIDEO INTERVIEW. ALSO, LEBANESE BA'TH PARTY CHIEF 'ASIM QANSUH HAS CLAIMED TO A FRIENDLY DIPLOMAT THAT HIS PARTY IS FORCED TO TURN AWAY VOLUNTEERS

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FOR THE MARTYRDOM PROGRAM SINCE IT HAS OVER 30 ALREADY IN TRAINING. QANSUH IS A MEMBER OF THE NATIONAL COMMAND OF THE SYRIAN BA'TH PARTY AND IS WELL-KNOWN AS AN ALLY OF SYRIA.

WHAT MOTIVATES THE MARTYR?

6. THESE INDIVIDUALS ARE DRIVEN BY FERVOR AND

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COMMITMENT TO A CAUSE, IN THIS INSTANCE THE LIBERATION OF SOUTH LEBANON. THE PSYCHOLOGICAL MILIEU HERE IS FERTILE, SINCE FOR MOST SYRIANS THE STRUGGLE AGAINST THE ISRAELIS IN LEBANON IS A POPULAR AND RIGHTEOUS CAUSE. MOTIVATIONS ARE ALSO SUBTLY MIXED WITH DEEP-SEATED ISLAMIC VALUES (ALTHOUGH SOME OF THE MARTYRS HAVE BEEN CHRISTIANS). THUS, PRESS COVERAGE HERE DOES NOT USE THE TERM SUICIDE TO DESCRIBE THE BOMBINGS; RATHER, THESE ARE "SACRIFICE" OR MARTYRDOM OPERATIONS, USING ARABIC WORDS WITH A RELIGIOUS ETYMOLOGY. THERE ARE REPORTS THAT THE MARTYRS' FAMILIES RECEIVE POSTHUMOUS FINANCIAL AND OTHER REWARDS.

7. THERE IS ALSO A POPULAR PERCEPTION THAT THE MARTYRDOM OPERATION IS A WEAPON OF THE WEAK, WHICH STRIKES TERROR IN THE HEARTS OF A STRONGER VICTIM. A SENSE OF MORAL SUPERIORITY IS ASSOCIATED WITH MARTYRDOM. FOR EXAMPLE, ONE GROUP WHICH CLAIMED CREDIT FOR AN OPERATION IN SOUTHERN LEBANON AGAINST THE ASL CALLED ITSELF "THE LAUGHING DEATH" (AL-MAWT AL-DAHIK), A MACABRE SOBRIQUET WHICH CARRIES A SENSE OF STRENGTH IN THE FACE OF INSURMOUNTABLE ODDS.

8. LAST BUT NOT LEAST, THERE IS THE MODEL FOR THE PARTICIPANTS IN THESE OPERATIONS OF IRAN AND ITS FIGHT AGAINST A HEATHEN ENEMY IN IRAQ. THE IRANIAN EXAMPLE EXISTS AS THE ONLY OTHER CASE WE ARE AWARE OF IN THE MIDDLE EAST OF CONSCIOUSLY APPLIED SUICIDE.

THE POPULAR REACTION--"SAINT & MARTYR SPEAK FROM THE TOMB"

9. SYRIAN MOTIVATIONS FOR SPONSORING SUICIDE OPERATIONS ARE CLEAR--A MARTYR DOES SPEAK FROM THE GRAVE. EACH MARTYRDOM OPERATION ALLOWS THE REGIME TO TRUMPET ITS CHOSEN PATH OF CONFRONTATION--AS OPPOSED TO NEGOTIATION--WITH ISRAEL. EACH ACT IS ALSO AN IMPLIED REBUKE TO "WIMPIER" ARAB STATES. EACH MARTYR'S NAME IS SPREAD ACROSS SYRIA'S NEWSPAPERS, GIVEN AT LEAST 15 MINUTES OF PRIME TIME TELEVISION, AND PUT UP ON A SIGN BOARD ABOVE A SYRIAN SCHOOL. THE REGIME ALSO ACCRUES GREATER MORAL AUTHORITY IN DEMANDING THAT ITS CITIZENS BEAR THE MANY COMPLAINTS ("SACRIFICES") OF LIFE HERE. MOREOVER, SYRIA HOPES THAT THERE WILL BE A DEMONSTRATION EFFECT IN THE OCCUPIED TERRITORIES, POSSIBLY SPARKING SIMILAR INCIDENTS OF SELF-IMMOLATION ON THE WEST BANK.

10. POPULAR REACTIONS ARE MIXED. MORE URBANE AND SOPHISTICATED ELEMENTS OF SYRIAN SOCIETY ARE REPULSED BY MARTYRDOM, BUT THEY OFTEN SHOW GRUDGING RESPECT FOR IT. SOMETIMES THEY EXCLAIM THAT IF THE PALESTINIANS HAD BEEN CONDUCTING SUCH OPERATIONS SINCE 1948, THERE WOULD BE NO OCCUPIED TERRITORIES. FOR THE MULTITUDE, WHOSE BELIEF SYSTEM IS SIMPLER, MARTYRS ARE AN INSPIRATION.

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11. HAFIZ AL-ASAD HAS HAMMERED AWAY SO INSISTENTLY AT THE THEME OF MARTYRDOM THAT WE TEND TO THINK IT IS MORE THAN JUST A TACTIC TO KEEP THE POT BOILING IN SOUTHERN LEBANON. INDEED, ASAD OBSERVERS SAY THE EMPHASIS ON MARTYRDOM IS SOMETHING HE HAS HAD EVER SINCE HE CAME TO POWER. IT IS POSSIBLE THAT HE SHARES SOME OF THE SHI'A EMPHASIS ON FATALISM AND DEATH. SINCE EARLY IN ASAD'S TENURE, THE 'ALAWI COMMUNITY IN SYRIA HAS PUBLICLY PROMOTED ITSELF AS "ORTHODOX SHI'A." THIS COMMUNITY WAS NOT PREVIOUSLY NOTED FOR MARTYRDOM, BUT IT DOES HAVE A THOUSAND-YEAR HISTORY OF BEING SEVERELY REPPRESSED AND, LIKE THE IRANIANS, IT HAS CARRIED THE ARTS OF SECRECY AND DISSIMULATION TO ADVANCED LEVELS. FOR ALL HIS BA'THI-NESS, THERE MAY BE SOMETHING OF A SHI'A IN HAFIZ AL-ASAD.

12. HAFIZ AL-ASAD'S INCREASINGLY APPARENT PERSONALITY CULT IS ALSO STRENGTHENED BY HIS ASSOCIATION WITH THE MARTYRDOM OPERATIONS. TO OUR KNOWLEDGE, NONE OF THE 1985 MARTYRS HAS SUCCEMBED WITHOUT ASSOCIATING HIS/HER NAME IN SOME MANNER WITH THAT OF ASAD, HAILED AS THE "GREATEST ARAB HERO." IN TURN, ASAD INVOKES THE NAMES OF THE MARTYRS IN HIS PUBLIC ADDRESSES, USING THESE AS A VEHICLE TO REACH OUT AND TAP THE SENTIMENTS OF POLITICALLY IMPORTANT SEGMENTS OF THE SYRIAN POPULATION, 50 PER CENT OF WHICH IS UNDER THE AGE OF 16. THUS, WHILE THE MILITARY SIGNIFICANCE OF ANY OF THESE OPERATIONS TO DATE IS SLIGHT, EACH NONETHELESS IS POLITICALLY ENTHRALLING, ENGAGING EVEN A WESTERNER IN MORBID FASCINATION IF NOT APPROVAL.

13. BEIRUT MINIMIZE CONSIDERED. EAGLETON

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